

Living Together Outside of Marriage (Cohabitation)

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Integration Question: *Is it wrong for Christians to cohabit, live together, before marriage?*

Theological Statement

Cohabiting, living together outside a covenant of marriage, is very common today even amongst Christians. While there are many different motives to cohabiting, if two people decide to live together because they are in an emotional, physical and/or spiritual relationship, and/or they want to see if it would work for marriage, like a trial run, they are missing the mark. A major issue with a couple living together outside of marriage is that their relationship is usually sexually active. Scripture teaches that any sexual activity outside of marriage is sin. In Matthew 15, Matthew records Jesus teaching His disciples that people defile themselves when they act on things that are contrary to God's kingdom. Jesus says, "For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, sexual immorality, thefts, false witness, slanders. These are the things which defile the man" (Matt. 15:19-20). The Greek word for sexual immorality is *porneia* and means engaging in sexual activity of marriage, including sexual fantasies and thoughts, as well as watching and entertaining sexual images or videos. Jesus is clear, anyone engaging in *porneia* has missed the mark and is defiled. One reason cohabiting is wrong is because the sexual nature of it is sinful. Additionally, sex, as good as it feels, is much deeper than any feeling. It is a signpost of the relational intimacy that we share with God, as His Spirit fills us and becomes one with us (Ep. 5:18; John 17:21). It is to be experienced as a means to love and experience love at a covenantal basis. To treat it otherwise, for married couples and sexually active single people alike, is missing the mark.

If a couple lives together but does not become sexually active, most other reasons for cohabiting still miss the mark as they reduce the significance of what it means to enter into a covenant with another human. When two people come together it should be for the purpose of

cultivating and radiating God's presence in creation, not saving money by only paying one rent, or "testing the water" to see make sure the other person does not snore loud, or is not a messy teeth brusher. Because, if it turns out not to be a good fit, and they break off their relationship as a result, then it absolutely reveals the foundation of their relationship has missed the entire purpose of God's design. To understand this design, we must understand the creation story. God created Adam in a sacred, a temple garden, tasked to serve (*ābad*) and keep (*šāmar*) the garden. The terms are primarily used of the Levitical priests tasks in the tabernacle/temple as they preserve sacred space (Gen. 1:15; Num. 3:28). It is within the context of seeing Eden and creation as God's sacred space that God recognizes it is not good for Adam to be alone. So, God creates a suitable helper for him (Gen. 2:15). Before a woman is created Adam cannot find anyone suitable for him amongst the animals. Finally, God creates Eve, out of Adam's side (*sela*). *Sela* is not an anatomical term, but rather, depicts Eve as a helper (*ezer*) and ally, a co-equal who is equally yoked to help him radiate God's presence and communion in sacred space. The forty other times *sela* is used in the Bible it refers to the other side of a building/structure, as in the tabernacle. And in almost all of the other twenty references of *ezer* in the Hebrew Bible, God is referred to as the *ezer*. While Genesis Two closes declaring "a man shall leave his father and his mother and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh", it must not be neglected that before marital function was assigned, Adam and Eve represented a union with each other and their Creator for the purpose of cultivating and radiating God's presence in creation (Gen. 2:24). Our created purpose is foundational and serves as the reason for being interested in another person. Generally, Christians living together prior to marriage are doing so as a means to elevate their own fulfillment, without recognizing the bigger design they are supposed to be filling that is meant to only come via covenantal commitment represented through marriage.

Ministry Application

For Christians who live together outside of marriage and justify it by believing God created the other person so that they would not be alone (Gen. 2:18), I would encourage them to get even more relationally intimate with Jesus. Similarly, for those who are cohabitating because they believe it is the solution to loneliness, I would encourage them to find a community that they could invest in discipleship with others. Jesus is a perfect example. Jesus proved that one can be fulfilled without living with another person so long as there is intimate relationship with God and a deep community with others. Paul certainly did not think living together, or even marriage, was imperative for living as image bearers of God. In fact, quite the opposite (1 Cor. 7:8-10). Paul talks about brotherly and sisterly affection and love towards one another significantly more than marriage and sexuality (Rom. 12:9-10; 1 Pet. 1:22; 1 Thes. 4:9; Eph. 4:1-2; Phil. 2:1-2; Col. 3:12-14). If we take our brotherly and sisterly relationship (discipleship) as seriously as Paul wants the Church to, then it would create an environment where loneliness, a leading factor for sexual expression, is replaced by community and discipleship. Practically, make it a habit to wake up every morning spending an hour in prayer talking with Jesus. Spend an hour at midday evangelizing and sharing the gospel with people. And spend an hour at night with others doing discipleship through reading Scripture and being students of the Word. If one can spend their time doing these spiritual disciplines, the loneliness or need for another to fulfill their desire for comfort would be replaced by His Comforter.

Secondly, I would counsel Christians cohabitating prior to marriage to not live together until they entered into a biblical covenant together. For a man who is living with his girlfriend while raising children together, I would counsel them to live in separate bedrooms. Sexual activity is such a distraction, especially outside of marriage, that it clouds one's conscious of the

true purpose of marriage, which Paul reminds us is really about Jesus and His bride, the Church (Eph. 5:22-33). When people are committed in their hearts to becoming one with each other, the next practical step is to get married and live together. Skipping the marriage part and going straight to living together distorts the depiction of God's covenant faithfulness. It portrays that people can act and do "oneness" things, such as emotionally having no guard, sexually becoming one, and raising a family, without any commitment and accountability. On the other hand, when people enter into a biblical covenant (marriage) they are declaring before God and others they have made a commitment and are willing to be held accountable by the Creator, as well as friends and family. If people are on this level of commitment, and cohabitating outside of marriage there are, in my experience, deeper rooted reasons, such as sex or comfort, that are obscuring them from God's ideal.